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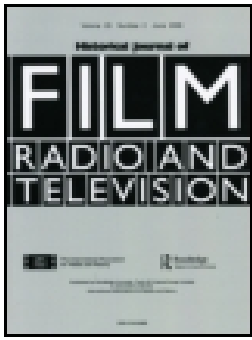
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Whatever happened to the British 'B' movie? Micro-budget film-making and the death of the one-hour supporting feature in the early 1960s

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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE BRITISH 'B' MOVIE? MICRO-BUDGET FILM-MAKING AND THE DEATH OF THE ONE-HOUR SUPPORTING FEATURE IN THE EARLY 1960S

Laura Mayne

The British 'B' movie had its heyday from the post-war period up until the early 1960s. 'B' movies were cheap feature films of around one-hour long which were shown along with 'first' features as part of cinema double-bill programmes. But by 1963, British film companies had ceased production of second features for a number of reasons: they were no longer commercially viable due to rising production costs, their quality was much maligned at a time when American companies were producing higher budget, glossier fare, and by the early 1960s television was producing the kinds of low-budget crime dramas favoured by 'B' movie producers. However, the passing of the 'B' movie was mourned by some, who had seen it as a potential training ground for talent in an indigenous industry which offered few routes in for film-makers. Some cinema exhibitors also worried about how the decline of the 'B's would affect the staple cinema double bill. This article will examine the events which led to the decline of the British 'B' movie in the early 1960s, arguing that the demise of this production mode can shed light on the structure of the British film industry in the 1960s, as well as highlighting some of the challenges which faced film producers throughout the decade.

In Britain, the early 1960s saw a sharp decline in the production of one-hour supporting features, or 'B' movies, due to a number of factors including rising production costs, changing patterns of exhibition and the growing popularity of

Correspondence to: Laura Mayne, Department of Theatre, Film and Television, University of York, Baird Lane, York YO10 5GB, UK. E-mail: laura.mayne@york.ac.uk

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television. Researching the late history of the British ‘B’ movie uncovers a range of issues which have never been properly explored in film scholarship – and if the subject has received more attention in recent years, there is still work to be done, particularly given the plethora of supporting features which were produced in Britain in the post-war period. In 1996, Brian McFarlane, one of the first scholars to address this issue, identified the critical neglect of the British (as opposed to the Hollywood) ‘B’ film; while 10 years later, Andrew Spicer’s work on the films of Terence Fisher placed the director’s early work on second features in the 1950s within their creative and industrial contexts.¹ David Mann’s book on Britain’s first TV/crime series explores the transition between second features and television, as the latter took over the staple crime drama in the 1950s and 1960s.² But the most definitive industrial history of the British ‘B’ movie can be found in Steve Chibnall and Brian McFarlane’s 2009 monograph on the subject, which goes a long way towards addressing its critical and academic neglect.³ However, few of these works have explored in any detail the industrial circumstances surrounding the abrupt decline of the ‘B’ movie in the early 1960s. Yet a consideration of that decline can provide a valuable insight into the structural problems and wider challenges which faced the film industry throughout the decade.

This article draws on research undertaken at the archives of the completion guarantor Film Finances as well as research carried out at the archives of the Cinema and Television History Research Centre at De Montfort University. In addition, the analysis is underpinned by statistical information extrapolated from a database containing production information on the 991 British films released between 1960 and 1969, which was compiled by the author for the AHRC-funded ‘Transformation and Tradition in Sixties British Cinema’ project. Using this combination of quantitative and qualitative sources, the focus of this article will be on how the British ‘B’ movie can shed light on the difficulties facing film-makers seeking entry into the industry in the 1960s. This will in turn provide insights into the effects of the industry’s structure and practices on the fortunes of second features and supporting productions. Finally, it will argue that the response of the production and exhibition sectors to the decline of the supporting feature shows an industry caught between traditional industrial practices and social change, fearful of further economic crises and ultimately paralysed by doubt.

Background

Decade yardsticks like 1960 or 1970 are not always useful in terms of the ways in which we study history. Did the Sixties really begin in 1960? Not if we follow the arguments of historian Arthur Marwick, who posits a ‘long sixties’ beginning in 1958, and sees the ‘High Sixties’ as running from 1964 to 1968, while Dominic Sandbrook’s *White Heat* positions the beginning of the 60s in 1964 and its end in the mid-1970s.⁴ The benchmarks imposed by historians tend to correspond with social, cultural and political change (the ‘Swinging Sixties’; changes in fashion, culture and pop; the signing of the American Civil Rights Act, etc.). But there is some logic in arguing that the ‘High Sixties’ began for the British film industry in 1964, with the end of the New Wave cycle of northern ‘kitchen sink’ films, the

appearance of the 'Swinging London' films, the wholesale transition to colour and, finally, the death of the 'B' movie – which, one can argue, belonged to a different era of British cinema, industrially and culturally. Aesthetically speaking, supporting features do seem more reminiscent of post-war cinema, with their depictions of British life seemingly a long way from the world of 'Swinging London'. However, in terms of production modes, the second feature had its historical origins in the cinema of the 1930s.

The British 'B' movie evolved out of the production styles and methods of the quota quickies, the cheaply made films which were produced to satisfy the stipulations of 1927 Cinematograph Films Act, which stated that 30% of exhibited films had to be British to protect against US domination of the industry. To satisfy these quota demands, many American companies made hastily produced films which became a staple of cinema programmes in the 1930s, frequently comprising the lower part of the cinema double bill. But by 1938, US companies had largely pulled out of the supporting features market, when the revised Cinematograph Films Act of that year released them from their obligations with the aim of encouraging the production of bigger, more expensive films with international appeal.⁵ For the first time, the responsibility for making supporting features rested with British independent producers, something that, Chibnall and McFarlane argue, they were unprepared for.⁶ As a result not many of these films were released during the war. However, after 1945, British 'B' films underwent something of a revival following wartime production cutbacks.⁷ Chibnall and McFarlane characterise the state of affairs in the film industry after 1945 as follows:

On the one side stood the major producers, British and American, who were interested in making longer and more lavish pictures that would draw audiences as a single attraction (with only a perfunctory supporting programme). Ranged against them, and poorly equipped, was the army of small film-makers, whose interests lay in the double bill and flexible cinema programming. What power they had come not from any economic muscle, but from the stubborn resistance of cinema audiences to any attacks on a two-feature programme that they regarded as value for money.⁸

The double bill remained the preferred mode of cinema exhibition. The 1948 Films Act differentiated between first features and supporting programmes for the first time, set the quota on second features at 25% (and for first features at a seemingly impossible 45%, though this was later revised) and stipulated a minimum spend on supporting features to improve quality.⁹ This was difficult, as second features were sold to exhibitors for a fixed price, and thus had a limited chance of being profitable unless they were good enough to be screened as first features or co-features (and thus eligible for box office returns).¹⁰

These films were generally made on budgets of between £10,000 and £25,000. From 1950 second features became eligible for payments from the British Film Fund, which was collected from the levy on box office receipts known as the 'Eady levy', and following campaigns by production associations throughout the 1950s they were finally made eligible for double payments from this fund after 1960. Chibnall and McFarlane note that this led to a brief 'Indian Summer' for second features, though this proved short lived as rising production costs, the

growing influence of television and the increasing impossibility of recoupment meant that producers were less interested in making these films and the circuits were less interested in booking them.¹¹ As Table 1 shows, 1964 definitively saw the end of this type of film.

As for their quality, much maligned by critics (when they were not simply ignored), the aesthetics of supporting features were highly constrained by their production processes. Extreme budgetary constraints and the need for efficiency meant that dialogue was relied upon more heavily than action to drive narratives, while the rising costs of studio rental meant that location shooting was preferable. A large proportion of British second features were crime films (see Figure 1), detective dramas and films which explored the ‘seamy side of life’, and they often drew heavily upon the economy of noir aesthetics. Though largely dismissed by film publications like *Monthly Film Bulletin*, there were many notable examples of

TABLE 1 Proportion of 'long films' released between 1960 and 1969

Year	Films released (British)	Film length of 72 min and under (supporting features)
1960	132	36
1961	113	37
1962	122	39
1963	114	27
1964	82	18
1965	83	8
1966	82	5
1967	87	7
1968	96	8
1969	80	4

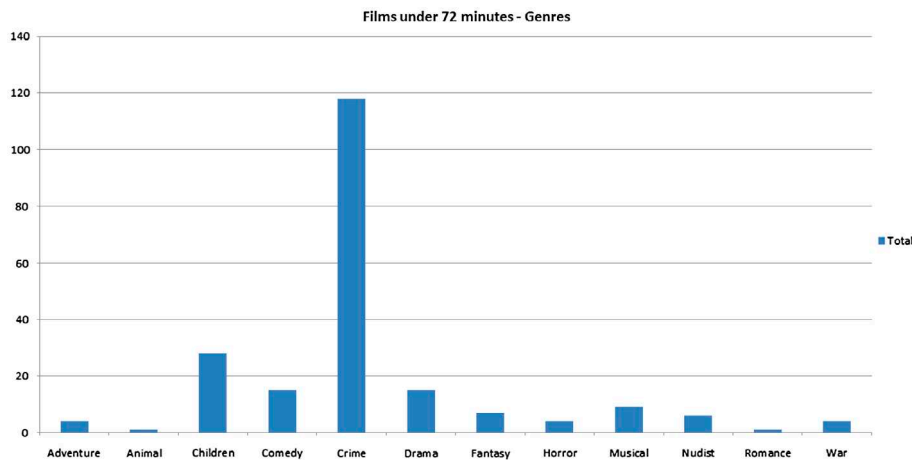


Figure 1. Genres of films under 72 minutes (second features) 1960–1969

the type. Independent Artists' *October Moth* (John Kruse 1960) is a case in point: an atmospheric thriller which follows a mentally unstable young farmer as he kidnaps a woman whom he believes to be his dead mother. He holds her hostage in a farmhouse with his terrified sister while he plays out his dark, Oedipal fantasies. The film is expressionistic in its use of light and shadow, while jarring camerawork lends credence to Lee Patterson's portrayal of a tormented young man, aesthetic qualities that are rarely associated with this level of production.

B movies could also explore the complexities of contemporary society and especially notable for its depiction of class and racial tensions is Jim O'Connolly's *The Little Ones*, a poignant story shot in a hand-held, realist style which follows two poverty-stricken young runaways as they make to leave England for a better life in Jamaica. Released in 1965, the film provides an insight into a contemporary London which was far from 'swinging'. But these films are unlikely to make even make a footnote in the canon of British cinema, not because they are undeserving of reappraisal, but because second features tended to be dismissed as cheap and low-quality, and as such barely made an impact at the time. As was noted in a report on the industry for the Institute of Economic Affairs in 1966, 'occasionally such films as these will attract critical attention – and there is also a small cult of horror films – but the general level is unadventurous and most second features reach the screen unnoticed by the press'.¹² However, a *New York Times* reviewer praised *The Little Ones*, which 'crept into town yesterday on a circuit double-bill. At the bottom, naturally. We have one objection. This low-budget entry, made by some people we never heard of and running for only an hour, should run about twice as long'.¹³

Only a few active producers continued to make supporting features after 1961. Merton Park Studios were kept busy producing the highly popular Edgar Wallace anthology for Anglo Amalgamated distributors, a series of 47 one-hour films made between 1960 and 1964 which were the only programme of 'B's to receive consistent distribution on the major circuits at this time. Independent Artists, based at Beaconsfield studios, were also producing a handful of supporting features through Rank, while a few hardened producer-directors like Francis Searle continued to work in this sector. However, despite an apparent lack of commercial viability the second feature was still, in the early 1960s, being mooted as a viable endeavour, with production bodies like the British Film Producers Association calling for better quality pictures in order to stimulate exhibitor and audience demand (Table 2).¹⁴

This call for a reinvigoration of the supporting feature market serves to highlight the desperate situation in an industry where there were few routes in for would-be film-makers, at a time when financial uncertainty meant that distributors tended to privilege 'safe' proven formulas over innovation. Though the British 'New Wave' cycle of films seemed to signify a new creative energy in the industry from the late 1950s, this was short lived, and it is worth remembering that though films like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960) and *A Taste of Honey* (Tony Richardson, 1961) were stylistically ground-breaking, these films tended to be adapted from novels and plays which had already proven successful, while their budgets were kept low to mitigate the possibility of commercial failure.¹⁵ A production crisis brought matters to a head for independent producers

TABLE 2 Supporting feature producers, 1960–1969

Company	Producer	Films	Studio	Main Distrib.	Genre
Merton Park	Jack Greenwood	47	Merton Park	Anglo-Amalgamated	Crime (47)
Danziger	Edward and Harry Lee Danziger	23	New Elstree	United Artists	Comedy (8)
				Warner-Pathe	Crime (7)
				Paramount	Drama (4)
				Columbia	War (3)
Butcher		11	Various	British Lion	Adventure (1)
				Butcher	Crime (10)
					Drama (1)
Independent artists	Julian Wintle and Leslie Parkyn	9	Beaconsfield	Anglo, Rank	Crime (4)
					Drama (3)
Bill Luckwell	Bill Luckwell	6	Walton, Ardmore	Columbia	Crime (6)

when, in the winter of 1963, a number of films were delayed releases on the Rank and ABC circuits and the independent distributor British Lion, widely seen as a counterweight to the two majors, was put up for sale. Though British Lion remained in a third force in industry, independent production never fully recovered. In truth, this was due less to the crisis than to the fact that times were changing; US companies were offering more expensive and entertaining fare while simultaneously driving up budgets to the point where small British producers could not compete, while the kinds of low budget crime capers and dramas favoured by ‘B’ movie producers could increasingly be found on television. The following section will explore in detail the production context of the ‘B’ movie and examine closely those production processes which made supporting features something of a thwarted training ground for new talent.

Cost vs. creativity

Documentaries and two-reelers and low-budget ‘B’ features are the obvious place for new directors to experiment; they need the chance, and if the industry doesn’t know that it needs *them* it might as well shut up shop and go into the bingo business for keeps.¹⁶

Chibnall and McFarlane refer to the companies who made these films as ‘The “B” Factories’, and while film scholars often try to resist comparisons between studio film-making and the factory production line, this term is appropriate when we take into account the stringent conditions under which these films were made. David Mann argues that it is easier to identify a body of ‘B’ movies by company rather than individually; for example, one can distinguish, through script, *mise en scene* and sometimes even the actors involved, a Danziger, Butcher’s or Merton Park production. In the case of the 47 Edgar Wallace thrillers produced by the latter company between 1960 and 1964, actor Bernard Lee regularly played a detective

(though not the same character) in each film, and the series often featured recurring actors even though each film was a standalone story. Merton Park had set out to make second features which, through a funding deal with Anglo, had distribution on a major circuit (Rank) and were also geared towards an international market, with dubbed versions produced for France, Italy and Germany. They were even occasionally exhibited as first features, by linking two films together.¹⁷ Chibnall and McFarlane argue that part of the reason why the Edgar Wallace films were so successful was that they borrowed advertising, marketing and formatting techniques from television, and as such they 'catered to an audience now used to the rhythms of television programming, by employing regular scheduling, careful product branding and quality control'.¹⁸

At the other end of the scale were the Danzigers – the company that was perceived to have the shoddiest sets, the worst scripting and the cheapest looking productions. For example, *Feet of Clay* (Frank Marshall, 1960) is a predictable noir thriller which proceeds in a plodding fashion, with a lawyer (Vincent Ball) investigating the murder of a probation officer. The cuts between studio and location can be jarring and the acting is at times stilted (though it's worth noting that the film by no means represents the worst of the genre). The company's *modus operandi* meant that the content and style of their films could vary depending on the props and studio space available. The main priority for the Danzigers was not quality, but how quickly and cheaply a production could be shot. According to writer Brian Clemens, who worked for the company in the 1950s:

... they'd come to me and say, 'Look, we've got two weeks to shoot, so we want you to write something for these sets, a seventy minute second feature, and it must have the Old Bailey, a submarine and a mummy's tomb in it.' So I'd write it to order. And nobody believes that they made movies like this once, but it's absolutely true.¹⁹

This attests to the fact that the creative vision of one, or a few, individuals is not something that is easy to identify in B films, and as such, production context is key when approaching them, with the focus being on the company rather than on the director.

In 1944, the Palache Committee had expressed hope that supporting films and low-cost features would provide new opportunities for the training of technical staff and actors, and by the early 1960s there were still those who saw the potential for second features as a risk-free space in which directors, writers and technicians could experiment with unconventional techniques and new modes of storytelling.²⁰ However, though many actors may have viewed the Danziger films as something of a training ground, the need for efficiency when shooting to tight schedules meant that it was, on the whole, experienced technicians who could work well to a formula that were needed.²¹ When we look at the numbers, taking the films of three of the companies most active in second feature production in the early 1960s – Danzigers, Merton Park and Independent Artists – this certainly appears to be the case.

The Danzigers were undoubtedly the worst offenders when it came to giving opportunities to a range of talents. The 23 one-hour films they produced between 1960 and 1964 were made by a handful of directors; Godfrey Grayson, Max Varnel, Ernest Morris and Frank Marshall, while scripts were provided by just two

writers, Mark Grantham and Brian Clemens (though Brian Clemens would go on to have a very distinguished career in television). In terms of the 47 Edgar Wallace anthology films produced at Merton Park, we find more variety among the directors employed, though cinematographer Bert Mason worked on 18 of the films and James Wilson 17. They also tended to be edited by the same man – Derek Holding, and to employ the same writers – Philip Mackie, Robert Stewart and Arthur La Bern. Independent Artists only produced nine second features, with Don Sharp and Jack Shampan each directing two, while Ernest Steward and Michael Reed were the principle cinematographers on all nine. Producers Julian Wintle and Leslie Parkyn of Independent Artists had taken over the operation of Beaconsfield Studios in 1958. According to Christopher Wintle, son of Julian, ‘B’ movies were an excellent way for the company to utilise studio space which was standing empty while also giving a few of the directors and technicians associated with the company ‘something to do’, and scripts were often kept on hand to go into production at short notice.²² Thus, while supporting features may have seemed an ideal training ground for new talent, the reality was that the modes of production involved were prohibitive in this regard.

Francis Searle’s *Freedom To Die* (1961) can offer an example of the bare bones efficiency which was necessary when shooting a ‘B’ movie, and the difficulties which could plague a production if it ran even slightly over schedule. As Ralph Bond, documentary film-maker and General Manager for A.C.T. films, wrote in *The Times* in 1962:

There can be no margin of error ... One day over can mean that [the producer] will be compelled to call on his guarantors and lose his no-claim bonus. There is no time for retakes, no pause for fresh thinking and reassessment.²³

Freedom to Die was shot in Ireland at Ardmore Studios on a budget of £18,000 and was financed by Butcher Film Distributors, the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC) and the Irish Film Finance Corporation (IFFC). Like first features, second features were generally funded to the tune of 70% by the distributor, with the remaining 30% ‘end money’ provided by the production company and/or another source of funding (potentially the government-funded NFFC or IFFC). *Freedom to Die* was to be made as part of a double-package deal with another B feature, *The Body Came Back*. *Freedom* follows an escaped criminal (Paul Maxwell) who goes in search of a safe deposit box which was hidden by his recently deceased cellmate, kidnapping a young woman in the process. Production consultant John Croydon’s cost report on the film for the completion guarantor Film Finances was typically uncomplimentary. He describes the script as

... conventional cops-and-robbers, not terribly well done; ... sordid to a degree and includes a sexual bargaining sequence which, in tradition of second feature production, will probably prove to be pretty disgusting! I can’t quite understand why the IFFC and NFFC want anything to do with it!²⁴

The 61-min film was shot in three weeks. To offer a point of comparison, low-budget ‘A’ features like the *Carry On* films tended to be shot in 6–7 weeks, while the cheap and cheerful Danziger ‘B’ movies were often shot in just 10 days.²⁵ *Freedom to Die* exceeded its budget, with the final production cost coming in at

£22,014.²⁶ This was due to a delay which pushed the shooting schedule over by a few days. Correspondence between Croydon and Film Finances suggests that the delay was due to the producers falling foul of union rules onset, which caused a halt to production and incited some trouble with the ACTT which was subsequently smoothed over.²⁷ After *Freedom to Die* was back on track, a frantic Searle argued that the money lost could be recouped if shooting on his other feature, *The Body Came Back*, commenced immediately.²⁸ But unfortunately, Butchers were unsatisfied with the script for *The Body Came Back*, while the NFFC wrote to Film Finances stating that they were rescinding their offer to fund the second film.²⁹

Chibnall and McFarlane argue that the absolute upper limit for the cost of a second feature at this time was £25,000.³⁰ Given the slim possibilities for profit, as well as the fact that they were sold at a fixed price, going over budget by even a few thousand pounds could be disastrous for a supporting film. This can be illustrated by a breakdown of the revenue totals vs. production costs for Philip Ridgeway's *The Switch* (1963) which went over its original projected budget of £23,000. Much of the finance for this film was recouped from the British Film Production Fund (£13,738) and from foreign sales (£2539) which demonstrates the importance of the Fund for second feature producers, as well as highlighting the importance of international sales to television (Table 3).³¹

It was therefore preferable that budgets for 'B' movies be kept as low as possible. *The Switch* was originally sent to the NFFC budgeted at £25,000, but this was cut to £23,000 at the request of the Corporation. The deferral of fees on the part of producers and directors was also common, not just to second feature production but to independent production in general (for example, producer Peter Rogers and director Gerald Thomas would often defer their fees for the *Carry On* films³²). But producer Philip Ridgeway was unhappy about the fact that he was expected to defer fees for the story, script, production and overheads on *The Switch*, and was not expected to claim any expenses before or during production: 'Everyone else has been reimbursed for their legitimate expenses, why, therefore, should I, the instigator of the production, be penalised?'³³ But if the increasing impossibility of even breaking even on these productions was the main reason for their decline, the other key nail in the coffin of the 'B' movie related to how they were perceived by the industry and by critics – even though, ironically, the quality of supporting features was actually rising in the early 1960s.

TABLE 3 Cost of production and repayments for Philip Ridgeway's *The Switch*, 31 December 1965

Financier	Cost of production	Repayments
Rank	15,500	17,533
NFFC	5500	4476
Film finances	1000	
Producer	2000	
Total	24,000	22,009

Quality vs. reputation

Terence Kelly, Graham Norton and George Perry's 1966 report for the Institute of Economic Affairs into the effects of the monopoly of Rank and ABPC on the industry identified how the cinema was perceived amongst the general public:

Compared to television, cinema long seemed a declining industry, unreceptive to originality or initiative, unwilling to give responsibility to the young, seriously lacking in content, and plying its wares in gloomy halls irrevocably associated with the 1940s.³⁴

In July 1962, the ACTT invited representatives from a number of organisations, including the Federation of British Filmmakers (FBFM), to discuss how best to encourage second features. The FBFM representatives stressed need for quality, argued that second features should take more creative risks, and that new creative personnel should be encouraged by special action on part of distributors, unions and studio owners.³⁵ However, film-makers were caught in something of a Catch-22 situation: in order to raise standards and quality, the cost of buying second features as part of a package would have to be raised – but in order to sell these films at a higher price, they would have to be seen as a quality product which could attract audiences – and that they were most definitely not. As Ralph Bond wrote in *The Times* in 1962: 'So long as second features are treated like free vouchers given away with a packet of soap flakes they will not be able to raise their standards – as your correspondent would like to see'.³⁶

Though supporting features were churned out so quickly as to leave no time for art or thought, in fact there was rather a lot a small company might achieve on a limited budget if they worked creatively to cut costs. Anthony Perry and Kenneth Cavander were two ambitious film-makers who believed that the second feature market could present some small hope for independents to work creatively, with the freedom to explore a wider range of subjects at low cost but also low risk. In 1961, it was with this idea in mind that they approached the major British distribution companies with a proposed programme of low-budget productions which might help cultivate new talent. However, their proposal met with some resistance:

What we found was a preoccupation with the problems of the large first feature market, and no policy towards low budget production, certainly not as a creative contribution to the industry. A.B.C.'s attitude was to regard such films as 'studio fillers', to be slipped in when floor space was available; Rank were promoting no production on this scale at all; British Lion had a stock pile of films and were not reading scripts, though they later proved very open to a special proposition. Only Bryanston – themselves producers – understood the independent producer's isolation.³⁷

Small companies lacked the resources to consider a programme of short features, while investing in one-off productions was not economically viable. Large companies were in a better position to make this kind of strategy work, but British Lion – long regarded as the main source of support for independent British producers – was pulling out of supporting features by 1963 and Bryanston, who facilitated the

production and distribution of a mix of 'A' and 'B' features, had ceased production activity by 1964. For major companies like ABC and Rank, the priority was firmly on first features, and where responses to scripts sent in by Perry and Cavander were enthusiastic, the suggestion was to produce them as first features on budgets of £75,000 or more.³⁸

This partly arose from a prejudice, whether founded or otherwise, regarding the varying quality of 'B' films, as well as perceptions on the part of large companies about the difficulties of producing good work on very modest budgets. Indeed, Ann Wintle, wife of Julian, wrote in her memoirs that 'disliking the connotation, Julian and Leslie refused to call these one-hour films B pictures'.³⁹ Made on budgets of £22,500 (slightly higher than the average for a 'B' movie) the second features made by Independent Artists were fairly high-calibre. In *The Big Day* (Peter Graham Scott, 1960), Donald Pleasance plays an accountant who is waiting to hear news of a big promotion, while Andree Melee plays the secretary with whom he is conducting an affair. A sordid take on the business milieu, Chibnall and McFarlane cite this film as one of the 'classics' of the B movie genre. One reviewer praised *The Big Day* as

... a prime example of how one can make a good film on a small budget ... It has no heroes and no happy ending but it holds the interest throughout and is well acted from start to finish. It can be recommended to anyone who is tired of the old trite situations and triter dialogue.⁴⁰

Double payments from the British Film Production Fund in 1960 had, in fact, given the British supporting feature a second lease of life.⁴¹ However, within a few years this had resulted in a spate of overproduction which meant that the supply of films was soon outstripping demand. This quickly led to distributors tiring of the 'B's. As David Kingsley of British Lion wrote in correspondence to Francis Searle, 'in our view there have been too many of these robbery stories'.⁴² Two years later, Kingsley wrote 'We have too many routine second features awaiting release and we have decided that we will only go ahead with exceptional projects of an offbeat nature'.⁴³

In effect, the quality of the 'B' movie was rising because this backlog had increased demand for better quality pictures, ensuring that those distributed were the cream of the crop, but that others languished unable to sell at home or abroad. International sales were a key area of recoupment for these 'one-hour films', but by 1962 William Gell of Monarch was finding it difficult to obtain a sale for Searle's film *Ticket to Paradise*, citing the fact that the US television market was apparently 'in the doldrums'.⁴⁴ The following year J. Phillips wrote to William Chalmers regarding Searle's film *Freedom to Die*, concerned at the absence of foreign sales and citing the nature of the film (not a feature, but not a short) as an issue: 'Please see what you can do on this film ... I quite understand it would be easier if it was 7000 feet, but, Bill, it is not'.⁴⁵ By 1964, the British 'B' movie was dead, and the staple double-feature format was also increasingly under threat, as it was becoming incompatible with longer running times for first features. A consideration of how the industry responded to these trends (either by sustaining the double-feature or seeking its abolition) can demonstrate the increasingly fraught relationships between producers, distributors, exhibitors and their audiences in the mid-1960s.

After the 'B's: the 'mini-feature' and the changing cinema programme

In light of these changes, it is important to remember that exhibitors still had a quota to fulfil and a supporting programme to provide, and many exhibitors remained wedded to the idea of the double-feature programme even though it was becoming seen, in some quarters, as outmoded. As early as 1961, an article in the *Guardian* criticised the fact that the cinema programme was much the same as it had been before the coming of television, and reported that the public were tired of the increasing length of films:

... two hours viewing is the most an audience can comfortably take ... those indescribably bad 'B' pictures which Hollywood still turns out by the dozen are no longer necessary. As one manager put it, if the public wants to see films as bad as these it can stay at home and see them on television.⁴⁶

However, some cinema managers said that audiences still felt cheated without them.⁴⁷ According to Hammer boss James Carreras: 'The public will always patronise the theatre with the double bill and stop away from the house that is showing merely the single feature. They will shop for the full three-and-a-half hour programme'.⁴⁸ Kelly, Norton and Perry found that Rank's market research had confirmed audience preferences for a second feature with the main film, even when the film was especially long: 'audiences will accept a supporting programme of shorts, though one exhibitor found that even with *55 Days at Peking*, which is 154 min long, people had still expected a second feature'.⁴⁹ This reliance on the double bill as 'value-for-money' was something that was apparently ingrained among audiences, but it was also something that, by the mid-1960s, was beginning to lose traction.

A survey of cinema-going in London in 1963 indicated that second features were not really that memorable, or popular – in some ways it really was a case of pandering to audience expectation and of sticking with a familiar formula that had been the norm for a couple of decades.⁵⁰ Indeed, the reluctance to abandon second features on the part of exhibitors and the trade in general (even though many wished to) was perhaps symptomatic of paralysing indecision at a time when audiences were rapidly dwindling and television was growing in popularity. Put simply, exhibitors were frightened of taking any action that might potentially drive audiences further away. However, this was complicated by the fact that audience habits and expectations were changing (many families preferred to watch television in the early evening, for example)⁵¹ as well as the trend towards longer running times as the decade progressed.⁵² Twenty-two films out of 114 British films released in 1963 were over 100-min long, whilst in 1968 that figure was 44 of the 96 films released. Of those 44 films, 15 were over two hours long (in 1963, only three films had been over two hours long). Consequently, by 1967 *Monthly Film Bulletin* was reporting that the 'make-up' programme was gaining 'ascendancy over the double-bill'.⁵³

Feature films varied in length, and in order to pad out the cinema programme exhibitors would often show shorter American and British films in addition to a mixture of cartoons, documentaries and shorts. In terms of the major circuits, Rank produced the short film documentary series *Look at Life*, while

ABPC tended to produce their own newsreels. Harold Baim, the most prolific maker of short films in the 1960s, had procured a deal with United Artists to produce shorts of around 30 min, which were distributed with films which were two and a half hours long.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Francis Searle, who had been among the last directors of the one-hour supporting features, began to look for ways to continue to profit from the bottom half of the cinema programme. By 1966, Searle was making the case for what he termed the 'screen-miniature', and was vying for the interest of Rank in a programme of fiction shorts of just under 33 min for a cost of £9000 apiece. These films would allow the flexibility to be packaged with travelogues or newsreels, as well as supporting larger 'epic' type productions. As John Hogarth of Monarch Distributors noted in correspondence to Searle in 1966:

As far as the UK market is concerned there is without a doubt a tremendous interest in this type of product, particularly as there are a number of releases scheduled for this autumn of the 'epic type' where a three-reel supporting feature is all that would be necessary for completing the programme length.⁵⁵

The viability of Searle's programme of 'screen miniatures' rested on the success of his first film, *Miss MacTaggart Won't Lie Down*, which was produced by Chairene productions, distributed by Monarch and partly funded by the NFFC. The story follows Jeannie MacTaggart as she returns to her hometown of Drumlochrie to find that she has been declared legally dead. Discovering that the townspeople have in fact buried her long-lost twin sister, she is unable to have herself declared 'alive' through a quirk of the legal system, which presents her with some problems. Miss MacTaggart embarks on a petty crime spree (she cannot be arrested, as the dead cannot commit crimes) in the hope of legal intervention, and eventually overturns the system by threatening to bomb the houses of parliament, though at the end of the story it is revealed that the bomb was a bluff, and was, in fact, a haggis. The film was quite popular, was well received by Rank and was scheduled for release with *The Professionals* in August 1967. A review in the *Northamptonshire Evening Telegraph* stated that audiences were 'appreciative of Miss Mullen's delightful character piece in the principle role in *Miss MacTaggart Won't Lie Down*, a "mini-feature" with setting in the Scottish Highlands'.⁵⁶

However, even for a film-maker with an established track record, backing by a major distributor could be difficult to find, even where a proposed programme of shorts seemed likely to produce a modest profit. After deducting distribution charges at home and abroad, as well as expenses in the UK, Searle was ultimately looking at a profit of £7450 on a short film with a budget of £9000 (Table 4).⁵⁷

Searle was trying to finance two other shorts in a similar fashion to *Miss MacTaggart* as part of his package deal – *Gold is Where you Find It* and *The Pale-Faced Girl*. However, though financiers liked the idea of a short film programme they were still circumspect in the midst of yet another production crisis. The NFFC was a key port of call for short films, but by 1966, the Corporation was dealing

TABLE 4 Costs and projected recoupment for *Miss MacTaggart Won't Lie Down*

Company	Production cost	Projected recoupment
Monarch	1000	Foreign (incl. TV) £5000
Rayant	1500	UK £4000
NFFC	6500	Eady revenue £7450
Total	9000	16,450

with its own financial difficulties. Ronal Hopkins of Rayant distributors declined to fund Searle's series of films, writing:

Firstly, I do not have to tell you that access to money these days is terribly difficult ... my own opinion is that had some returns been available on the *Miss MacTaggart* film which would give our chairman and myself an indication of what we might expect over a long term – things might have been different.⁵⁸

A key problem was attracting finance, even for these small features, without the backing of a major distributor. However, Rank was unwilling give a firm guarantee until the film had already been completed and screened at a trade show. As John Hogarth of Monarch Distributors wrote to Searle in September 1966, 'the proof of the pudding must only be in consumption of same and until the release is actually confirmed you must understand our reluctance to commit ourselves financially for a programme of such a size as you propose'.⁵⁹

One might think the changing cinema programme would create greater demand for short films which could be packaged with a main feature, and, at a glance, this sector of the industry would appear to have been healthy. In 1964, 216 short films were produced in Britain. However, 54 of these consisted of films made as part of Rank's *Look at Life* series, 53 were *Pathe Pictorials* and nine were Harold Baim's aforementioned productions for United Artists. The remaining films were made up of sponsored productions (28), films by the Children's Film Foundation (20) travelogues (7) nudist films (2) animated films (8) and independent films (3).⁶⁰ For the most part, it was difficult for short fiction films to find distribution on the major circuits unless they were funded by Rank or ABPC, as the circuits generally showed their own projects. And unfortunately, there could be little hope of financial return without a major circuit deal. Thus, though research carried out by the BBC in 1965 suggested that audiences might respond well to entertainment shorts, the problem, as ever, was one of distribution.⁶¹ Colour prints also cost money, which inhibited recoupment, and fees paid for the eventual sale to television were normally very low.⁶² There was consequently little room for the growth of a short film sector in Britain, and this in turn highlights the fact that there was little basis for a healthy indigenous industry by the late 1960s. This was a defining problem for the industry, and it was a problem which was to become particularly pronounced when the withdrawal of American finance in the early 1970s precipitated yet another production crisis.

Conclusion

So whatever happened to the British 'B' movie? In truth, the gap left by the demise of the one-hour supporting feature was never really filled. When it became clear that second features could not represent hopes for new talent in a declining domestic industry, sights turned to the short film, but the hold of the major circuits Rank and ABC left few outlets for this kind of product. Nowhere in British cinema were the effects of the structural problems in the industry felt more keenly than at the low budget end of the spectrum, and ultimately the failure of the supporting feature market to function as a training ground was symptomatic of these issues; namely, the lack of defined entry routes into industry, fear of financial risk in the face of ongoing production crises, and deeply ingrained working practices which stubbornly resisted change. By the early 1960s, the 'B' crime movie was a tired mode which, in any case, was now being successfully produced on television, while companies like Independent Artists and the Danzigers had long been developing their own television interests. However, at the level of exhibition the decline of the 'B' movie provides a valuable insight into the ways in which the cinema programme was gradually changing throughout the decade; longer running times, an influx of longer, bigger budget American productions and changing social habits meant that, in the 1960s, the double-feature ceased to be the prevailing mode of cinema programming.

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Notes on contributor

Laura Mayne is a postdoctoral research associate on the AHRC-funded 'Transformation and Tradition in Sixties British Cinema' project, based at the University of York. In 2014, she completed her thesis on the cultural and industrial impact of Film4 on British cinema as part of the AHRC-funded 'Channel 4 and British Film Culture' Project. Her research specialism is in post-war British cinema with an emphasis on industrial histories, institutional practices and production cultures.
